



Symbolism of the Apple in Greek Mythology

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Apples appear throughout numerous world religions and mythologies as a common symbol and motif. It is important to note though that in Middle English as late as the 17th century, the word 'apple' was used as a generic term to describe all fruit other than berries, so the appearance of apples in ancient writings may not actually be the apples known today. The etymology of 'apple' is an interesting one. That aside, Greek mythology presents several notable apples: the Golden Apples in the Garden of Hesperides, different golden apples associated with Atalanta, and of course the golden Apple of Discord. Each appearance of apples presents unique examples of symbolism.

The Golden Apples in the Garden of Hesperides were a wedding gift to Hera from Gaia and were protected by a great serpent called Ladon. The Apples as well as the rest of the life in the Garden were tended by the Hesperides, minor earth goddesses or nymphs and daughters of the Titan, Atlas. The Garden itself rested in an inaccessible spot near the edge of the world under the power of the Olympians. For his Eleventh Labor, Hercules was sent to the Garden to retrieve three Golden Apples for King Eurystheus. The exact location of the Garden and the Apples was unknown and Hercules had to pry the information from Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea. Along the way, he also encountered and freed Prometheus who told not to try pick the Golden Apples himself, but to ask Atlas. Hercules continued on with his journey, encountering several other figures, killing Ladon, and then he implored Atlas to pick the Apples for him. Eager to sit aside his great burden of holding the heavens up, Atlas was easily convinced and Hercules took up the heavens in his place. Atlas then decided to take them to Eurystheus himself and leave Hercules there. Hercules tricked him by claiming he needed to make a pad for his shoulders to hold the heavens up more comfortably, asking Atlas to take them up again for only a moment. When Atlas held the heavens again, Hercules snatched the Apples and left. After the ordeal, Athena took the Apples from Eurystheus and returned them to the Garden, anticlimactically.

The Golden Apples of the Hesperides bear a striking resemblance to the Golden Apples present in Norse mythology. The apples in both cases are solid gold, beautiful to behold, and grant immortality. An obvious symbol they represent is immortality because it is the power they grant when eaten. The trials of Hercules to obtain the Golden Apples only for them to be promptly taken away from Eurystheus are representative of the futility of attempting to attain immortality. The Golden

Apples belonged to the gods and the gods easily took them back. In other words, immortality (and the Apples) only belonged to the gods and not to mortals.

Golden apples make another appearance in Greek mythology, but they are not the Golden Apples from the Garden of Hesperides. Atalanta was a girl raised by a bear and then taught the skills of the hunt. She proved more skilled than the hunters who trained her and she quickly became famous throughout Greece, not only as a huntress but also as being faster than any man. She promised to wed the first man who could outrun her, but had little hope of that happening and did not want to give up the freedom she had living wild in the forest. Hippomenes (or Melanion) fell in love with her and prayed to Aphrodite for help. She gave him three apples made of gold and told him to use them. During the race he tossed one of the apples in front of her each time she would pass him. Each time she would stop to pick up the mysterious fruit. They proved to be extremely heavy and each apple slowed her down. Hippomenes defeated her, but only by a single stride. After they wed, Atalanta had him turned into a lion so that he could be by her side during the hunt. In a less romantic version, Hippomenes was supposed to pay penance to Aphrodite in return for her help and forgot afterward, so she turned them both into lions as punishment for his lack of appreciation.

In this instance, the apples symbolize selfishness and distraction. Atalanta, though attached to her freedom as a virgin huntress, could not bring herself to avoid chasing after the golden fruit as they were thrown in her path. Once she picked them up, she was not able to put them down and they slowed her, ultimately costing her the race. This greed was Atalanta's flaw. Taking into account the latter version of the story in which Hippomenes neglects to pay tribute to Aphrodite, the apples are given increased symbolism as objects of greed and selfishness. Hippomenes' desire for Atalanta caused him to call on Aphrodite, his only hope of obtaining his bride. Greek gods were never known for doing anything without something in exchange, but he of course forgot once he obtained his goal, and he suffered the consequences.

Probably the most famous of Greek mythology's apples is the Apple of Discord, which was a golden apple that indirectly started the Trojan War. Eris, the goddess of discord had not been invited to the wedding of Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis. She became enraged, stormed into the wedding feast and threw a golden apple onto the table, professing that it belonged to whomever was fairest with an inscription saying such on it. The goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite all reached for the fruit. Zeus decided that the fairest man alive, Paris of Troy, would be the judge of the contest and determine who received the fruit. Hera promised him power if he picked her, Athena promised him wealth, and Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful woman alive. He chose Aphrodite to receive the apple and she told him that Helen of Sparta would be his wife. Unfortunately, Helen was already the wife of King Menelaus and thus sparked the famous Trojan War.

The Apple of Discord is the ultimate symbol of vanity and it also represents the crux of a problem. Not only did the three goddesses in question all believe they were the most beautiful, but the series of events that followed quickly snowballed into a full-scale war beyond the realm of the Olympians and in the mortal world. At the center of the war was the apple and the simple gesture from Eris. Eris was not invited to the wedding essentially because no one liked her and Zeus thought she would ruin the festivities for everyone. She ended up very well ruining the banquet

and causing far more problems than if she had perhaps just been invited in the first place. The root of the conflict was ultimately Eris not being included. She simply then took advantage of the vanity of the other three. The fair Paris wanted the most beautiful wife, and his own greed regarding the matter made the problem exponentially worse. The rejected Hera and Athena were jealous and involved themselves in the war as well.

The symbolism of all of these apples tends to be along the same grain. The apples are all associated somewhat with negative human tendencies. The selfishness of Hippomenes in forgetting his promise to Aphrodite for Atalanta is similar to the vanity exhibited by Hera, Athena and Aphrodite over the Apple of Discord. Similarly, the pointless task of Hercules questing to obtain the Golden Apples from the Garden of Hesperides is similar to Atalanta not being able to resist chasing down the golden apples in her path and putting them down once she had them. A lust for the impossible or transitory (immortality and beauty) is also a common element of the fruit's symbolism. The fact that all of the mythological apples are all golden gives them an apparent material value because gold is a precious metal, tying them again to greed. They are all desirable fruits, but ones that should not be sought after - very much akin to the apples growing on the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. It is interesting to consider though again that none of these fruit in question were necessarily apples.

